What is Japanese Buddhism? Such a question might seem empirically obvious or begging for a tautological answer, but Orion Klautau broaches this very question in the preface to his Kindai Nihon shisō to shite no Bukkyō shigaku (The study of Buddhist history as modern Japanese thought).[1] Indeed, are “Japanese Buddhism” (Nihon Bukkyō), “Buddhism in Japan” (Nihon ni okeru Bukkyō), and the “Buddhism of Japan” (Nihon no Bukkyō) analogues, homologues, or just floating signifiers?

One could also tack on terms like “Japanese-style Buddhism” (Nihon-tekki Bukkyō) or “Buddhism of the Japanese” (Nihonjin no Bukkyō) to this collective mess, but therein lies the rub: I do not think there was or is much differentiation between the uses of these terms among scholars writing on “this” subject in Japanese. What is of importance—as Klautau argues—however, is the appearance of an almost universal trend among Japanese Buddhist scholars from the late Meiji period (vaguely speaking, after around 1900) onward to attempt to define, delimit, and demarcate the “Japaneseness” of Buddhism as found in the burgeoning Japanese state.

To begin answering this question, Klautau traces the historiography of “Japanese Buddhism” as seen in the writings of Japanese academics and Buddhist scholars (these two categories are often porous) affiliated with Tokyo Imperial University (Tōdai) during the late Meiji (1868–1912), Taishō (1912–26), and early Shōwa periods (1926–45). In the first part of this book, Klautau sets his sights on Hara Tanzan (1819–92), Murakami Senshō (1851–1929), Takakusu Junjirō (1866–1945), and Hanayama Shinshō (1898–1995). The latter half of this monograph offers a detailed study of the historian Tsuji Zennosuke (1877–1955) and his theory of the “Decline of [Japanese] Buddhism.” What we have received is not a typical monograph on the history of Japanese Buddhism. Monographs on Japanese Buddhism by a previous generation of scholars were often characterized by long and derivative explications on Heian and Kamakura Buddhism with a bit of Tokugawa and “modern” Japanese Buddhism slapped on at the end as an
uncomfortable afterthought. By contrast, Klautau offers focused inquiry into the history of the writing of the history of Japanese Buddhism in the “modern” period. As scholars now know, there was much more going on during this period than attempts at rectifying the dates of founders, positivistic probing into temple origins, transcribing faded manuscripts, and canonizing sutras.

If one wishes to argue that the deployment of heuristics like “Japanese Buddhism” and “Buddhism in Japan” already betrays a sense of categorical schizophrenia and muddled thought on the part of those who have so carelessly used them, the author’s first figure of inquiry, Hara Tanzan, is a case in point. Through an invitation by Katō Hiroyuki (1836–1916), Hara, a one-time defrocked Sōtō monk, pseudo-scientist, and Asakusa-based fortuneteller, taught some of the earliest lectures on Japanese Buddhism at Tokyo Imperial University under, ironically, the rubric of “Indian philosophy.” (So, here at least, we can surmise that “Japanese Buddhism” was somehow equated with “Indian philosophy.”) In his writings and in his lectures, Hara attempted to portray—vis-à-vis a posited Christianity—that Buddhism was based on the direct experiment/experience of the Buddha himself.[2] Christianity began and ended in belief. Buddhism, being “scientific” and a “philosophy” in its essence, also started from belief but culminated in “logical proof for the individual” (p. 73).[3] Hence, for Hara, Buddhism was deemed a (the?) true religion. Unlike the scholarship of figures who appear in later chapters of Klautau’s work, Hara’s “scholarship” was based more on his own intellectual peregrinations than on serious philological or source-based inquiry. It would be the next generation of Tōdai scholars whose “modern” intellectual armament would allow them to proffer a more academically acceptable veneer to their agendas.

Chapter 2, “The Birth of Japanese Buddhism,” turns to the early writings of the Ōtani priest and Buddhist historian Murakami Senshō. Although Murakami’s failed attempt at penning a magnum opus, his Bukkyōtōitsu ron (Treatise on the unification of Buddhism, or is it Treatise on the unity of Buddhism?), published in three volumes from 1901 to 1905, has been the subject of academic inquiry in much recent scholarship, Klautau convincingly argues that Murakami’s gloss on Japanese Buddhism can already be located in earlier writings, such as his Nihon Bukkyō-shi (Japanese Buddhist history, published in 1897).[4] As in his later works, Murakami claimed that the current state of the study of Japanese Buddhism was—mainly due to the “influx of modern western comparative religious studies”—based only on “the comparative research of individual Buddhist schools.” Sadly, he lamented, no scholar had yet to attempt to “unify” the various competing sectarian “doctrines” (p. 90). I should add that similar lamentations are found throughout Murakami’s oeuvre. This attempt at creating a unified field or systematic framework by which to position (Japanese) Buddhism was based not only on Murakami’s barely tenable positivistic historiography, but also on his interest in the “rediscovery” of the 1268 Hasshū kōyō (Essentials of the eight sects, authored by Gyōnen [1240-1321]) from the Meiji period onward. But, as Klautau notes, Murakami was less concerned with unifying Buddhism per se and more concerned with promulgating the superiority of Japanese Buddhism over its Asian counterparts. In doing so, Murakami argued for a prominent role for Japanese Buddhism in the Japanese society of the day.

Murakami’s conception of Japanese Buddhism as being the natural outcome of a kind of Buddhist evolution takes on more saliency in the third part of chapter 2 (“Murakami Senshō on the Characteristics of Japanese Buddhism: Precepts, Philosophy, and Faith”). Klautau draws on a number of published public lectures and essays by Murakami that span almost twenty years (1906–24). As he makes clear, what is astounding in these quoted passages is that Murakami—one of the foremost scholars of Japanese Buddhist histo-
ry in his day—seems to have been trapped in a
discourse of ahistoricity and conjecture. Although
one can trace the “development” of precepts and
doctrine in the history of Indian Buddhism, it was
“questionable” as to whether Indian Buddhists
had real “religious faith” (shūkyō teki shinkō, p.
98). Turning to China, we are told that it is hard to
imagine that Chinese Buddhism had much in the
way of organizational or systematic development
and that it was also lacking in “religious faith.”
Murakami correctly noted the influence of Dao-
ism on Chinese Buddhism but he then summarily
dismissed Chinese Buddhism in that it never tran-
sceeded the “faith of the lower classes.” Muraka-
mī further asserted that although the Chinese did
practice the nenbutsu (recitation of the Buddha’s
name), it was limited to “a small number of lo-
cales,” nothing more than the provenance of “the
lower classes,” and was not comparable to the “Ja-
panese nenbutsu” (p. 98). What set Japanese Bud-
dhism apart from its Asian antecedents was that it
managed to transform itself into a “developed re-
ligious faith.” Murakami stated that this level of
religious faith in Japan was “most likely incompa-
rollable [to the religious faith found] in all of the
countries of the world” (p. 99). Despite being re-
membered as one of the architects of the academ-
ic study of Japanese Buddhism, in terms of his
motivations, Murakami often seem to be in line
with his fortune-telling predecessor, Hara: both
concurred that Japanese Buddhism was the only
religion in which one finds true faith. Chapter 2
closes by showing that by the 1890s Murakami’s
writings evinced an emergent discourse on how—
again, unlike in India or China—Japanese Bud-
dhism was compatible with the state and the im-
perial system. Such a rhetorical move, Klautau
maintains, was also no doubt played out with
such incidents as Uchimura Kanzō’s (1861–1930)
refusal to pay homage to the Meiji emperor and
the Imperial Rescript on Education in mind.

This newfound discourse on the compatibility
(nay, sociopolitical necessity) between Japanese
Buddhism and the modern imperial state is ad-
dressed in chapter 3, which outlines a relatively
unknown text by Takakusu Junjirō. Takakusu,
who spent some seven years studying Indology
and Buddhology in Europe before embarking on
his academic career in 1897 as a lecturer at Tokyo
Imperial University, is best known for his work on
supervising the collation and editing of the Upan-
ishads (published 1922–24), the Taishō Tripitaka
(1922–34), and the Nanden daizōkyō (1936–41).
Takakusu’s 1916 work, Bukkyōkokumin no risō
(The ideals of a Buddhist citizenry) shows us a dif-
sidente to the Oxford-trained Buddhologist.
Despite (or because of) his sojourn in Europe,
Takakusu warned that one must be judicious in
importing foreign culture to Japan. Takakusu set
up a crude (yet all too common) binary scheme
that bifurcated “Japan” and the “West.” (Note that
Takakusu spoke of “Japan” and not the “East.”) Japan had “spirit, family, and morality.” The West,
in juxtaposition, valued “material[ism], the indi-
vidual, and knowledge” (pp. 127, 128). One can
quickly guess where Takakusu, a Shin layman,
was headed next: Shinran (1173–1263). Shinran’s
Shinshū, we are told, is the “culmination of the
evolution of Japanese Buddhism.” Why so? Shin-
ran—the meat-eating family man—and his Shin-
shū were in “exact accord with the nature of Japa-
nese citizenry” (p. 130). In many ways, Takakusu’s
emphasis on the family—pace Western individu-
alism and materialism—should be seen as being
highly derivative in light of the fact that an untold
number of non-Buddhist writers and intellectuals
were concurrently espousing similar views. What
is of importance here is that Takakusu was fur-
ther defining this pan-Taishō emphasis on Japa-
nese familism (kazokushugi) into Buddhist par-
lance. We will come across a similar argument
put forth in the writings of Hanayama.

As we have seen, both Murakami and
Takakusu were not mere Buddhologists. (I have
never met a “mere Buddhologist,” for the record.)
Both were developing an organic and nationalis-
tic vision of Japanese Buddhism based on the Ja-
panese family unit. It is also easy to imagine how
both of these scholars—and both of whom were affiliated with Shin Buddhism—faced little intellectual dissonance when arguing for how individual families and the imperial family, Amida and the emperor were all cords in a single fabric. And both men, like Hara, held that what they were doing was purely academic. Murakami and Takakusu, if we follow Klautau’s logic, had already mapped out much of the tectonics that would be eagerly employed by Japanese Buddhist thinkers during the interwar years.

Hanayama Shinshō’s *Nihon Bukkyō no tokushoku* (Characteristics of Japanese Buddhism, 1936), the subject of chapter 4, shows exactly how this earlier discourse on the uniqueness and superiority of Japanese Buddhism revealed itself in the years before Japan’s fateful period of total mobilization. Hanayama, also a professor at Tokyo Imperial University and a Shin priest (one begins to see a pattern emerge), located the fundaments of Japanese Buddhism in Prince Shōtoku (574–622) and his teaching of the One Vehicle (*Ichijō*).[5] Hanayama’s intent was far from sublime: the Japanese imperial state was founded by a Buddhist regent who espoused an organic doctrine of the sublimation of daily life, the state, and religion (Buddhism) into a collective whole. This formed and, some one thousand years later (!), still informed the essential ground and Lebensraum of the Japanese people. As with his teacher (Takakusu), Hanayama saw Shinran as being the first Japanese Buddhist who, through his disavowal of the precepts, was able to spread Buddhism to the Japanese populace (*kokumin*). We now arrive at something of an apogee in prewar Japanese Buddhist historiography. The Buddhist Heian prince is interlinked with the familial Shinran and, in turn, the essence of Japan and the Japanese is laid bare.

Although Hanayama’s work would be consigned to the archives after the war, Klautau points out that the fascination with the Kamakura (1185–1333) founders (notably, Shinran and Dōgen [1200–53]) still flourished in the postwar period in the writings of such scholars as Ienaga Saburō (1913–2002). Although Ienaga and other postwar scholars went to great pains to expunge the nationalist underpinnings that we find in writers like Murakami, Takakusu, and Hanayama, the fascination with the *ur*-moment of the Kamakura founders remained sanguine. Whether or not one chooses to see figures like Shinran as a nationalist family man or as a proponent of democracy and individualism (Ienaga), one is still playing the same game (albeit under a different heading): Japanese Buddhism and its history of great men are mere palimpsests for the politics *dur* jour. (Hanayama, for example, conveniently terminated his “research” on Prince Shōtoku after the Pacific War.)

At this point, the reader may be disillusioned by the fact that many of the most prominent Tōdai historians of Japanese Buddhism (sans Ienaga) seem to have been intellectual opportunists and crypto-apologists for the Japanese state. Not all Japanese scholars, however, saw Japanese Buddhism as a positive influence. The Tokyo University historian Tsuji Zennosuke, who is the subject of the second part of this work, honed in on what he identified as the decrepit and moribund state of the Japanese Buddhist clergy. Tsuji, unlike his colleagues in Buddhist studies, grounded his research in the readings of temple gazetteers, diaries, missives, and other forms of “non-philosophical” media. What he found was that Japanese Buddhism (in its lived and historical contingencies) seemed rotten to the core. Today, Tsuji is regarded as one of the first scholars to undertake an “objective” and “positivist” study of Japanese Buddhist history, and also known for presenting the still popular theory of the “Decline of [Japanese] Buddhism” (*Bukkyō daraku ron*).

An observant reader, and Klautau is one of them, will be readily cognizant that this conception of the decline of Japanese Buddhism was also present in the historical sketches provided by
those like Murakami and Takakusu. Indeed, all of these writers lamented the degenerate nature of Japanese Buddhism in the Tokugawa period and the devastation caused by the Meiji separation of buddhas and kami (shinbutsu bunri). This, conversely, was in opposition to the “golden age” of Kamakura Buddhism. Although many Japanese scholars and Japanese Buddhist thinkers still toe this line today, seeing the Kamakura period as the apex and culmination of Japanese Buddhism has more to do with hagiography than it does with historiography.

It is true that Tsuji’s writings did little to salvage or exonerate Japanese Buddhism. One finds no program for arguing for the superiority of Japanese Buddhism or for its obvious necessity within the modern imperial state. Here Tsuji disunites with Murakami, Takakusu, and Hanayama. Hence, he is often regarded as being a “pure” historian who was only interested in the facts.

What Tsuji shared with these thinkers, however, is twofold: first, he held that it was the convergence of politics and Buddhism that led to the decline of the Japanese sangha during the Tokugawa period; second, his historical trajectory is one of pure teleology. Murakami, Takakusu, and Hanayama—while accepting the supposed vagrancy of Tokugawa Buddhism—felt that this historical contingency could be effaced or artlessly avoided by simply bracketing it off. Tokugawa Buddhism was a mere aberration or lacuna in the grander and progressive movement of Japanese Buddhism. Tsuji saw it as the beginning of the end. It would seem, then, that Tsuji offered something of a sober corrective to the rosy hopes of salvation for modern Japanese Buddhism.

As Klautau aptly shows, however, a major flaw in Tsuji’s theory of decline is that it falls apart when he admits that the Tokugawa period was characterized by great achievements in Japanese Buddhist scholasticism, and that it was also a time in which the Buddhist clergy was actively struggling to apply this nascent scholasticism to their daily temple activities. Klautau uses the example of Tokugawa Shin doctrinal debates and practical concerns as to whether children could be born in the Pure Land (i.e., the Shōnichō ronsō). Like Catholic missionaries confronted with the question as to whether or not unbaptized “heathens” could be saved, Shin clergy and parishioners wondered and worried as to whether infants and children (and the elderly, incapacitated, and senile), who were not yet able to grasp Shin teachings, could be born on lovely lotuses in the Land of Bliss. Tsuji, who was one of the first to discuss this doctrinal debate in an academic setting, argued that this phenomenon was emblematic of the pejorative “formalization” of Buddhist doctrine (pp. 254–255). Against this, Klautau counters with the obvious. (Obvious, of course, after Klautau has pointed the problem out.) That a satisfactory doctrinal answer was never achieved is a moot point. That priests and parishioners were mutually engaged with these issues is indicative of intellectual and religious vibrancy, not of Tokugawa clerical degeneracy.

Part 2 ends with a brief discussion of later Japanese Buddhist historians’ (Tsuji’s disciple, Tamamuro Taijō [1902-66]; Tamamuro’s son, Fumio; and the former Ōtani University professor, Ōkuwa Hitoshi) attempts at rethinking Buddhism in the Tokugawa period. Despite these noble efforts to transcend Tsuji’s “Decline of Japanese Buddhism in the Tokugawa” paradigm in the post-war period, Klautau concludes by observing that we have a long way to go.

Allow me to close with several concerns I have about this work. One figure who is conspicuously missing from an extended discussion is Sakaino Köyō (1871–1933). Understanding how Sakaino’s prolific and influential body of work on Japanese Buddhist universality and Prince Shōtoku fits into the writing of modern Japanese Buddhist history is an unavoidable piece in Klautau’s overall argument. Likewise, I wonder if the focus on Hanayama’s writings on Shōtoku comes at the
expense of a broader inquiry into the role the histories of Prince Shōtoku (and there were many; too many to list) penned in the 1930–40s played. Granted, such an inquiry is a book in its own right. That said, the reader is left to ponder how relevant Hanayama’s writings were among what we may call the “prewar Shōtoku industry.” Finally, I would have liked to have seen Klautau take on some of the later writings of Tsuji. To cite one example, does a work like Tsuji’s Kōshitsu to Nihon seishin (The imperial family and the Japanese spirit, 1944) not evince a certain penchant for playing up the connection between emperors and Buddhism?

Such points for future research aside, Klautau’s study provides future scholars with a solid start for rethinking the history (and the writing of the history) of Japanese Buddhism. It is no doubt more than time enough to begin to reconsider just what it is when we utter, type, or think the very term “Japanese Buddhism” and all of its vaguely familiar glosses. This work is also commendable in that it opens up a much broader space in which to rethink the construction of modern Japanese intellectual history itself. Such a work makes it difficult to relegate the history of “Japanese Buddhism” to the narrow academic and sectarian confines of “Japanese Buddhist studies.” Although the dialectics of research will no doubt lead to future revisions and retractions concerning the writing of Japanese Buddhist history in the modern era, Klautau’s overarching argument will be hard to overturn: the modern project of writing Japanese Buddhist history was more often than not a writing of the Japanese state.[6]

Notes

[1]. As a personal aside, Kindai Nihon shisō toshite no Bukkyō shigaku sounds fine in Japanese. In English, the translation provided on the book’s copyright page—“The study of Buddhist history as modern Japanese thought”—resonates in a faintly odd cadence to my overly sensitive ears. Perhaps “Buddhist historiography in modern Japanese intellectual history” would have been a more apropos English translation.

[2]. Readers unfamiliar with the modern Japanese Buddhism argot may find the conflation of “experience” (keiken) and “experiment(ation)” (jiken) odd. This is further exacerbated as the term taiken (often translated—correctly or not—as “physical experience”) is often also used in a similar sense. What is noteworthy here is that many Japanese religious figures and scholars were wont to argue that religious experience was in fact analogous to scientific experimentation (i.e., “ultimate” religious experience was demonstrably empirical in nature). Tracing the genealogy of the uses and abuses of these terms would be a worthwhile project in its own right.

[3]. Here, of course, “logical proof for the individual” does not refer to proof that individuals exist, but that Buddhist experience leads to incontrovertible truth for those who immerse themselves in it.

[4]. For the most comprehensive study of Murakami in English, see the articles contained in The Eastern Buddhist 37, nos. 1-2 (2005). Also see Michel Mohr’s recent Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[5]. For another recent Japanese work discussing Shōtoku Taishi in this period, see Aratano Kazunobu’s Kōdō Bukkyō to tairiku fukyō (Tokyo: Shahyo, 2014), esp. chap. 1, 1.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at 
https://networks.h-net.org/h-shukyo


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38985

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.